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The Panama Canal Authority: A Company with Good Practices to Respond to HIV



Photographs of HIV education activities implemented by the Panama Canal Authority in 2014.

The Panama Canal Authority (ACP) is a Panamanian government entity established by the National Constitution to take charge of operating, administrating, conserving, maintaining, improving, and modernizing the Panama Canal, as well as its related activities and services, in accordance to current constitutional legal norms, in order for the canal to operate in a safe, continuous, efficient, and cost-effective manner.

The Organic Law of June 11, 1997, establishes the norms for its organization and operation. Due to its importance and nature, the ACP has financial autonomy, its own patrimony, and its right to administer it. However, between 1977 and 1999, the work now performed by ACP was undertaken by the Panama Canal Commission, a United States government agency, established according to the laws of the United States of America, and thus, even today the ACP is still considered a private entity.

Owing to this vision of ACP's private nature, the National Council of Business Enterprises (CoNEP) included it as one of the firms targeted for HIV/AIDS workplace prevention and awareness-raising from June 2010 to June 2011, with USAID|PASCA technical assistance.

The ACP had been implementing an HIV/AIDS program since 2004, when it incorporated into the Inter-Institutional Network for STI/HIV/AIDS Prevention under the Ministry of Health. At that time, the ACP recognized the need to create an HIV policy and developed the guidance that was reviewed and signed on November 30, 2004.

ACP representatives were benefitted by the CoNEP-USAID|PASCA project through the knowledge-transfer process that includes training, workshops, and methodologies aimed at implementing business policies to respond to and prevent HIV/AIDS in the workplace. The Project Systematization report states that the ACP has an implementation policy with optimum progress and clear objectives and with the guarantees and strategies that clearly evidence the understanding that a policy is a concrete action.

ACP's Labor Health and Welfare Unit is in charge of implementing the HIV policy. It manages an overall budget for all health-promotion

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activities undertaken by the unit, including those pertaining to HIV/AIDS. In 2007, it developed the first Strategic Plan to Implement the STI, HIV/AIDS Prevention, Control, and Management. At first, talks on “The Importance of Knowing Your HIV Status” were given to employees, but starting in 2009, the team constituted by the health and training sectors developed a course that includes several aspects of the HIV/AIDS, such as: general information on HIV/AIDS, statistics, factors influencing decision making, using a condom, the importance of HIV tests, videos and dramatizations on how to apply what they learned in various daily situations in the workplace.

The goal is to train one third of the company’s staff per year, given that it has approximately 10,000 employees, to whom voluntary HIV testing is being offered.

The firm also holds health fairs, provides pre- and post-testing counseling, holds demonstrations on how to use condoms, and distributes information materials, in cooperation with organizations such as Probidsidea, Génesis Panamá Positivo, PASMO, and the Ministry of Health.

The ACP is an active member of the Business Red Ribbon Committee since it was created. Its representative states that “education for the employees working in the canal, insofar as preventing STIs, HIV, and AIDS, must be dynamic and permanent, since human sexuality is just that. The Labor Health and Welfare Unit has kept the topic at the forefront, improving education opportunities to cover the issues that influence decision making, and not only repeating information on transmission and statistics, in addition to providing opportunities for employees to learn their HIV/AIDS status.”